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SPECIAL BULLETIN

THE GREAT WAR AND ITS LESSONS



By

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ADDRESS OF PRESIDENT BUTLER

AT THE

OPENING EXERCISES OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR
OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

SEPTEMBER 23, 1914



O each member of the University new or old, to the *Scholares docentes* and to the *Scholares discentes*, I give a hearty welcome on this opening day of the 161st year of Columbia's long and honorable life.

Our usual interests however great, our usual problems however pressing, all seem petty and insignificant in view of what has befallen the world while we were seeking rest and refreshment in the summer holiday. The murky clouds of cruel, relentless war, lit by the lightning flash of great guns and made more terrible by the thunderous booming of cannon, hang over the European countries that we know and love so well. The great scholars that we would have so gladly welcomed here, have not come to us. They are killing and being killed across the sea. Friends and colleagues whom we honor are filled with hate toward each other, and toward each other's countrymen. The words that oftenest come to our lips, the ideals that we cherish and pursue, the progress that we fancied we were making, seem not to exist. Mankind is back in the primeval forest, with the elemental brute passions finding a truly fiendish expression. The only apparent use of science is to enable men to kill other men more quickly and in greater numbers. The only apparent service of philosophy is to make the worse appear the better reason. The only apparent evidence of the existence of religion is the fact that divergent and impious appeals to a palpably pagan God, have led him, in perplexed distress, to turn over the affairs of Europe to an active and singularly accomplished devil.

What are we to think? Is science a sham? Is philosophy a pretence? Is religion a mere rumor? Is the great international structure of friendship, good-will and scholarly co-operation upon which this University and many of its mem-

bers have worked so long, so faithfully, and apparently with so much success, only an illusion? Are the long and devoted labors of scholars and of statesmen to enthrone Justice in the place of Brute Force in the world, all without effect? Are Lowell's lines true—

Right forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne?

The answer is No; a thousand times, No!

Despite all appearances, even in this wicked and causeless war which is decimating the flower of European manhood; multiplying by the million the widows, the orphans, the suffering and distressed; wrecking the commercial and industrial progress of a century; impoverishing alike the belligerents and the neutrals; closing the exchanges from New York to Buenos Aires; ruining the cotton planter of the South as well as the copper miner of the far West; recruiting an army of unemployed that will far outnumber even the countless hosts of the fighting legions; loosing in the frenzied combatants the primitive instincts for savagery and lust—even here there is to be found something on which this University may continue to build the temple of wisdom, of justice and of true civilization to which its hand was laid when George II was king, when Louis XV still reigned in France, and when Frederick the Great was at the height of his fame in Prussia.

We are a neutral nation, and the President has rightly enjoined us all to observe neutrality in speech and in deed. But neutrality is not indifference: it is not the neutrality of the casual passer-by who views with amused carelessness a fight between two street rowdies; it is the neutrality of the just judge who aims, without passion and without prejudice, to render judgment on the proved facts. We cannot if we would refrain from passing judgment upon the conduct of men whether singly or in nations, and we should not attempt to do so.

In the first place, the moral judgment of the American people as to this war and as to the several steps in the declaration and conduct of it, is clear, calm, and practically unanimous. There is no beating of drums and blowing of bugles, but rather a sad pain and grief that our kin across the sea, owing whatever allegiance and speaking whatever tongue, are engaged in

public murder and destruction on the most stupendous scale recorded in history. This of itself proves that the education of public opinion has proceeded far, and, whatever the war-traders and militarists may say, that the heart of the American people is sound and its head well-informed. The attitude of the American press is worthy of the highest praise; in some notable instances the very high-water mark of dignity and of power has been reached. When the war-clouds have lifted, and all the facts are known everywhere, I believe that the moral judgment of the American people as to this war will prove to be that of the sober-minded and fair-minded men in every country of Europe.

Next, it must not be forgotten that this war was made by kings and by cabinets: it was not decreed by peoples. I can testify that the statement that kings and cabinets were forced into the war by public sentiment, is absolutely untrue, so far at least as several of the belligerent nations are concerned. Certainly in not more than two cases were the chosen representatives of the people consulted at all. A tiny minority in each of several countries may have desired war, but the militarist spirit was singularly lacking among the masses of the population. People generally have simply accepted with grim resignation and reluctant enthusiasm the conflict which in each case they are taught to believe has been forced on them by another's aggression.

The most significant statement that I heard in Europe was made to me on the third day of August last by a German railway servant, a grizzled veteran of the Franco-Prussian war. In reply to my question as to whether he would have to go to the front, the old man said: "No; I am too old. I am seventy-two. But my four boys went yesterday, God help them! and I hate to have them go." "For, Sir," he added in a lowered voice, "this is not a people's war; it is a kings' war, and when it is over there may not be so many kings."

Again, a final end has now been put to the contention, always stupid and often insincere, that huge armaments are an insurance against war and an aid in maintaining peace. This argument was invented by the war-traders who had munitions of war to sell, and was nothing more than an advertisement for their business. Sundry politicians, many newspapers, and not a few good people who are proud to have their thinking done for them, accepted this advertisement as a profound politi-

cal truth. Its falsity is now plain to every one. Guns and bullets and armor are not made to take the place of postage stamps and books and laboratories and other instruments of civilization and of peace; they are made to kill people. Since war is an affair of governments and of armies, one result of the present war should be to make the manufacture and sale of munitions of war, a government monopoly hereafter. This is a case where invasion of the field of liberty by government would do good, not harm. Then, too, the export of munitions of war from one country to another should be absolutely forbidden. When that happens, the taxpayer will be able to see just how his money is spent, and to check the expenditure, and the powerful war-trader with his lines of influence in every parliament house and in every chancellery will be eliminated.

It seems pretty clear that when the present huge supplies of guns and ammunition are used up in the contest now going on, no civilized people will ever again permit its government to enter into a competitive armament race. The time may not be so very far distant when to be the first moral power in the world will be a considerably greater distinction than to be the first military power or even the second naval power, which latter goal is so constantly and so subtly urged on the people of the United States. How any one, not fit subject for a mad-house, can find in the awful events now happening in Europe, a reason for increasing the military and naval establishments and expenditures of the United States, is to me wholly inconceivable.

Another great gain is to be found in the fact that no one is willing to be responsible for this war. Every combatant alleges that he is on the defensive, and summons his fellow countrymen who are scientists and philosophers to find some way to prove it. The old claim that war was a part of the moral order, a God-given instrument for the spreading of enlightenment, and the only real training-school for the manly virtues, is just now in a state of eclipse. Each one of the several belligerent nations insists that it—and its government—are devoted friends of peace, and that it is at war only because war was forced upon it by the acts of some one else. As to who that some one else is, it has not yet been possible to get a unanimous agreement. What we do know is that no one steps forward to claim credit for the war or to ask a vote

of thanks or a decoration for having forced it upon Europe and upon the world. Everybody concerned is ashamed of it and apologetic for it.

It may well be, moreover, that the desperately practical and direct education which this war is affording will hasten very much the coming of the day when the close economic and intellectual interdependence of the nations will assert itself more emphatically and more successfully against national chauvinism and the preposterous tyranny of the militarists. The armed peace which preceded this war, and led directly to it, was in some respects worse than war itself; for it had many of the evils of war without war's educational advantages. We are not likely to return again to that form of wickedness and folly, unless perchance the continent of Europe is able to produce another generation of public men as self-centered and of as narrow a vision as those who have generally been in control of public policy there for forty years past. The whole card-house of alliances and ententes, together with the balance of power theory, has come tumbling heavily to the ground. Something far different and much more rational will arise in its stead. In the Europe of tomorrow there will be no place for secret treaties and understandings, for huge systems of armed camps and limitless navies, for sleepless international enmity and treachery, for carefully stimulated race and religious hatred or for wars made on the sole responsibility of monarchs and of ministers. Moral, social and political progress will refuse longer to pay the crushing tolls which a conventional diplomacy and an unenlightened statesmanship have demanded of them. It is not the Slav or the Teuton, the Latin or the Briton, the Oriental or the American, who is the enemy of civilization and of culture. Militarism, there is the enemy!

The first notable victim of the Great War was the eloquent and accomplished French parliamentarian, M. Jaurès. He was murdered by a war-crazed fanatic. In the course of a long and intimate conversation with M. Jaurès shortly before his tragic death, he dwelt much on the part that America could play in binding the nations of Europe together. He spoke of the success of the policies that had been worked out here to make the United States and Germany and the United States and France better known to each other, and he thought that through the agency of the United States it might eventually be practicable to draw Germany and France together in real

trust and friendship. As we parted his last words to me were: "Do not leave off trying. No matter what the difficulties are, do not leave off trying." To-day the words of this great socialist leader of men, seem like a voice from beyond the grave. They are true. We must not leave off trying. When exhaustion, physical and economic, brings this war to an end, as I believe it will at no distant day, the task of America and Americans will be heavy and responsible. It will be for us to bind up the war's wounds, to soften the war's animosities, and to lead the way in the colossal work of reconstruction that must follow. Then if our heads are clear, our hearts strong, and our aims unselfish—and if our nation continues to show that it means always to keep its own plighted word—we may gain new honor and imperishable fame for our country. We may yet live to see our great policies of peace, of freedom from entangling alliances, of a world concert instead of a continental balance of power, of an international judiciary and an international police, of international co-operation instead of international suspicion, generally assented to, and, as a result, the world's resources set free to improve the lot of peoples, to advance science and scholarship, and to raise humanity to a level yet unheard of. Here lies the path of national glory for us, and here is the call to action in the near future.

It is often darkest just before the dawn, and the hope of mankind may lie in a direction other than that Europe toward which we are now looking so anxiously. Arthur Hugh Clough's noble verses are an inspiration to us at this hour:

Say not the struggle nought availeth,
The labor and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
And as things have been, they remain.

* * * * *

For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,
Seem here no painful inch to gain,
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
Comes silent, flooding in, the main.

And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light,
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward, look, the land is bright.



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